



Bristol Cathedral

**A Sermon preached at the Eucharist, Sunday 12th January 2014,
By The Dean**

Baptism (Isiah 42:1-9)

The Church of England has been in the news again. We have not had a row in public for all of three weeks, so it was clearly high time we got cross about something. At issue is a new baptism service. *The Telegraph* has frothed and fulminated. Michael Nazir Ali, who used to be the Bishop of Rochester, talked about 'dumbing down' the liturgy. And a splendid 'senior source' apparently said:

This is more like a benediction from the Good Fairy than any church service.

The un-named source went on:

The trouble is that large parts of the Church of England don't believe in hell, sin or repentance. They think you can just hold hands and smile and we will all go to Heaven. That is certainly not what Jesus thought.

Whoever this person is, he or she then got a bit carried away and wonderfully suggested that the baptism service was (wait for it) being 'watered down'. Next week, I hope, we can look forward to an attempt to 'dig deep' into the funeral service.

There is of course a very serious point here. In the present baptismal rite a priest asks parents and godparents a series of questions:

Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?

I reject them

Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?

I renounce them

Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour?

I repent of them

It is the mention of *the devil* and *repentance* you need to notice. Baptism exchanges life for death, light for dark, redemption for sin. It changes things; not that, but this. In an ancient baptistery you would go down into the water in darkness and then you would be spun round to face the opening doors as you rose up, because repentance is a change of mind, it turns you round. There used to be exorcisms in early baptisms. All because the church believes that evil is dangerous and real.

Dangerous and real, and *profound*, evil cannot be tidied away in a few words. *Where does evil come from?*, asked St Augustine *I sought whence evil comes and there was no solution*. We are talking now about what it is like to be human, this is philosophy, theology, anthropology and more. It is not simple. *I sought whence evil comes and there was no solution*. I will say something now, but this deserves more time and we are going to return to it in the Lent talks this year. Put simply, we routinely make two mistakes. Asked to describe evil we start talking about evil things – Hitler, drugs. And that is misleading if I have a bad dishwasher (and at the moment I do) it is not because it sits in my kitchen hatching plots, it is because it does not work properly. Badness, evil is always a deficit, a thing that is not all it should be, a thing put to the wrong uses. Hitler lacked humanity, a packet of heroin is not in itself evil. We talk about evil things because you can see things, pick them up and put them down. It is a short step then to a devil with horns and a tail who

creates evil things. And that is about the oldest heresy there is – dualism. A good god making good stuff and a bad god making and stuff. That's the first mistake.

The second mistake is the one we make when we pull ourselves together and think that we are being silly when we talk about the devil. Monsters under the bed and behind the curtains are for children, so we tell ourselves that the problem we have got is simply about will power. If I could only stop dipping my hand into the tin of chocolate digestives, if I could only stop trying to be clever when I should be trying to be kind it would all be suddenly alright.

We make a mistake about the devil and we make a mistake about sin. We push the devil right out there, give him a toasting fork and a nasty leer and we think sin is what happens when we do not make an effort.

These are real problems. As a parish priest, preparing families for baptism, I used to glance down and see that *The Omen* or *Rosemary's Baby* amongst the videos and I wondered what they would make of those promises they would have to make:

*Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?
Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour?*

And it is precisely for that reason that we have a change to the liturgy. We are concerned that people will misunderstand us if we talk about the devil. We are worried they will be a bit baffled if we talk about repentance. So the new words are different.

*Do you reject evil?
I reject evil
And all its many forms?
And all its many forms
And all its empty promises?
And all its empty promises*

Do you reject evil... and its many forms... and all its empty promises. You can see how we got there. I speak as that parish priest who used to worry about what connections people were making, what wild imaginings they had about the devil.

There is a headache coming on. Theology is one of those pursuits, like swimming, where it is quite important to remember to breathe from time to time. Let's do that. For years *Private Eye* has run an occasional, savage series on the new worship of the Church of England – *The Alternative Rocky Horror Service Book* – this week, they produced a baptism service.

Do you, Keith and Sandra (or it may be Riley and Jordan), solemnly promise to keep little Beyoncé (or it may be Aston) out of trouble to the best of your ability?

Whatever

Do you diss wickedness in all its forms

Wicked

And will you help the littl'un avoid bad karma?

Deffo

Now, what *Private Eye* has picked up is that our liturgical language is beginning to sound like a dustbin lid rolling downstairs; but, much more disturbingly, it sweetens the pill. Will you keep this child out of trouble to *the best of your ability*. It is all about making an effort and how much effort you make.

Without ever saying that the devil is living in Fishponds (or Clifton) and dealing drugs the church says that evil is at large and it is deadly. It will seduce us despite our best efforts, actually it often lurks precisely in our best efforts. When politicians start talking about picking up the sword of truth or an irate husband says 'Allow me to explain what your problem is' we should start getting really worried. The problem is

not just that you make bad decisions and I make the odd innocent mistake. The problem is not just that cities and nations can act in self-interest. There is something more fundamentally wrong. We are prey to lies and deceit, we have a whole history of getting things wrong, we appear actually to be hard-wired to get things wrong. Evil might not be a thing, but it is raw and real. If we stop saying that, if we give up on trying to explain that, then we do not serve the gospel, God, or each other. We make it too easy, too often; we turn religion into a course of self-improvement in which there is no need for grace, the cross, repentance or redemption.

All this on the day when we hear a gospel reading about the baptism of Christ. That was a baptism in the desert remember, water in the wilderness, it was the Creator seen inside creation. It was not domestic, it was not merely personal, it was not a short course in morality or three steps to a healthier spiritual diet. It was life and power.

We heard another reading too – a curious reading, from Isaiah,

Here is my servant... my chosen... a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench... Isaiah 42:1-3

Sounds rather nice, *a bruised reed he will not break*; which means it easy to miss the thunder and the drums. This servant – the chosen one in Isaiah is actually a foreign king, Cyrus the conqueror, known as the *king of the four corners of the world*. Isaiah calls Cyrus *my servant... my chosen* because Cyrus captured Babylon and let the Jewish exiles go home. Cyrus was the warrior who could overthrow the nations and yet barely disturb the grass; he could cast down kings yet hardly stir the candle flame as he passed.

Isaiah writes for a people in slavery and finds the most unlikely saviour, a pagan Persian who lets the people go. That's the canvas in the Old Testament, that's the story. It is a story of nations, exiles, wars, slavery, intrigues, ethnic cleansing, the toppling of towers, the building of bastions. That is *always* the story in the bible, the big story of evil at large and the radical solution that is needed, not once, but again and again. The story of Christ on trial in an empire, the story of Christ crucified as a king, dying as a felon. The story in which he preaches about taxes and obedience, casts out demons, heals sickness proclaims a Kingdom.

If we set our sights on improving ourselves and worrying about empty promises then it can only be because we have forgotten the story we have told. God help us if we see neither the danger nor the future Christ sets before us. Evil and our redemption, sin and repentance, hope and glory are the stuff of our existence and the building blocks of faith. We have to think big and hope for more, we have to contemplate difficulty and wrestle with questions we can't quite answer. We have to trust in a baptism that descends into deep water before ever it rises to new life. The gospel is water and fire, blood and bread, crucifixion and resurrection and we tidy that up at our peril. We come this morning to Christ not to make new year resolutions, but to be fed, forgiven and redeemed.